

Book review of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe*

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The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe is not simply a book; it serves as a platform of dialogue among all community groups associated with religion and heritage. This dialogue goes beyond those community groups and individuals currently involved in the subject, either as researchers or as practitioners; it can embrace even those with a potential interest in the subject and even those currently excluded, for whatever reasons, from the discussion.

The observation that the book can serve as a platform of dialogue is not to be seen as a mere by-product of the writing and publishing procedure; it has been at the core of the project from the very beginning until the very end, based on a rigorous methodology: the initiative, i.e. the concept and the context (credited to the Centre for Religion and Heritage at the University of Groningen), and the selection of the collaborators; the opening to the public domain through the organization of a conference (Religious Heritage in a Diverse Europe) with the inclusion of a wide range of scholars and professionals, and the key questions addressed to them; and the decision to proceed with a publication, the division of the material in thematic sessions (Heritage and Diversity; Heritage between Religion and the Secular; and Heritage and Creativity), and the same structure of all thematic sessions (challenges, analyses, case studies, and lessons to be learnt). The aforementioned methodology can set an example for similar initiatives in the future.

The present book succeeds in exploring religion and heritage in connection with the key international developments of heritage management. Indicative examples to this end are: the connection of certain local community groups with religious heritage in terms of authenticity and values, as well as the exploitation of religious heritage for the sustainable development of these community groups; the increasing use of religious heritage by political authorities e.g. in the context of nationalism; the involvement of minority groups; and the increasing interest on the part of secular community groups.

Yet, certain elements of the book tend to move beyond the existing international developments of heritage conservation and management. To name a few elements: The part on creativity, i.e. a topic very infrequently addressed in similar discussions, sees religious heritage through the perspectives of continuity and change/evolution of religious traditions and associated crafts and practices, transcending the boundaries between past, present and future towards a dynamic, living

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continuum. The reference to the relevance of living heritage for highly secularised Western countries such as Sweden may also open a path to expanding the scope of the methodology. The emphasis on the need to formulate guidelines for ethical considerations in decision-making on the conservation of living religious heritage sites also calls for the development of a methodology for the planning process to safeguard living religious heritage.

In my opinion, the discussion initiated by the present book should continue, and expand beyond the European and the Christian context towards other contexts. A similar methodology could apply (see above) to allow for a comparative analysis and conclusions. To this end, it would be most interesting to explore the very concept of “religious heritage” in South-East Asian contexts such as the Indian one, in which “heritage” is often perceived by local community groups as something old, of low value, that needs to be replaced by something new and more advanced (e.g. a house or a road), while religious rituals and associated crafts are not seen as “heritage” but rather as part of the communities’ everyday life-style. To move even further, it would be challenging to recognise differing traditional maintenance practices of religious sites and objects in Australia, Asia and Africa which, though the material is generally preserved, may have completely different and even contradictory implications for the material of the sites. Examples of such practices are: partial replacement of existing material with same or with different material; total physical renewal; and replacement of the entire structure with a new one.

To sum up, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe* succeeds in opening up the dialogue, capturing the cutting-edge knowledge on the subject, and tracing some of the future developments.

References

Weir, T.H., & Wijnia, L. (eds.) (2024). *The Bloomsbury handbook of religion and heritage in contemporary Europe*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.